

Testimony before the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women
Women's Day February 9, 2010
By Stefanie Chambers, PhD

Good morning Legislators, PCSW Commissioners, and invited guests. My name is Stefanie Chambers and I am a professor of political science at Trinity College. One of my areas of expertise is race, ethnicity and gender in American government. During my eleven years in Connecticut I have learned quite a bit about the political and economic situation of my fellow Connecticut women and mothers. Today I hope to raise some important issues surrounding the recession as it relates to women across the country and in our state.

I would like to thank Teresa Younger and the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women for asking me to speak today. The PCSW plays a vital role in our state due to their advocacy on behalf of Connecticut women and their families, their educational outreach efforts, and their ongoing commitment to raising public awareness of the many areas where women remain on an unequal playing field today.

A great deal of emphasis has been placed on the position of men in today's "Great Recession." Seventy-eight percent of job losses have occurred in male-dominated fields such as manufacturing and construction. At the same time that these traditional men's professions have taken a hit, women's traditional fields such as health and education have been somewhat immune from this downturn. However, receiving less publicity is the fact that many other traditional women's professions such as retail, hospitality, and personal business services have experienced much the same downward trend as the manufacturing and construction industries. The emphasis on the recession as it relates to men tells only a portion of the story. It is vital that we also understand how the recession has affected women if we hope to develop broad solutions to the economic situation we find ourselves in today.

My comments today focus on the impact of the recession on women, and by extension, their families. The picture I present demonstrates the similarities between men and women in these challenging economic times. At the same time that all Americans have been touched by the recent downturn, I would argue that many of the structural barriers women face in our society exacerbate the problems faced by women economically and place all families at risk. We must expose these structural inequalities and search for solutions that lead to substantive change. Along these lines, I will offer a few recommendations aimed at achieving gender equality in employment and society more broadly.

Women have made significant contributions to our country's economy through their labor participation even before WWII when women entered the workforce in large numbers to replace men at war. Indeed, just last week the Institute for Women's Policy Research released a report about the effects of the recession on women's and men's unemployment. The report includes a summary of US Department of Labor Statistics from 1950 through 2009 illustrating that women's labor force participation has risen at about the same rate that men's participation has fallen. Today, 72% of men are part of the labor force compared to 60% of women. In 1950 the figures were about 86.5% for men and 34% for women. The steady increase among working women during this roughly 60 year period is attributable to many factors such as federal and state policies intended to equalize employment opportunities for women, expanding women's access to higher education, access to birth control, and the steady growth of service sector jobs. During this same time we have also made progress in terms of narrowing the wage gap between men and women. Yet, women still make 77 cents to every dollar earned by men. Much of this is attributable to the fact that jobs traditionally held by women (pink collar jobs) are largely undervalued in our economic system. African-American women earned just 70 cents for every dollar earned by men in 2007 and Latinas earned just 62 cents for every dollar men earned. Furthermore, even though women have been entering the workforce in large numbers, women have lost 2 million jobs in the recent recession, the same number as men in the previous recession. In other words, women's jobs are not immune from this recent downturn.

In September the *New York Times* ran a story about the growing number of women in the workforce as a direct result of the decline in employed men. The article demonstrates that this trend does not represent a step forward for women, but rather evidence of employers demand for cheap labor. Women in the labor market are more likely to be in part-time or contract positions and employed in sectors where job security is fragile. For employers looking for the best

deal, hiring women for part-time or contract work can result in significant savings in pay and benefits packages. For women, low wages, limited hours or non-existent job security have long-term impact on their financial stability.

Women also face increasing hardship supporting their families. Family income reliance is shifting from dual earners to women as sole earners as more men fall out of the labor force. Because women often make less than their male partners, it means that women are no better positioned now compared to when their husbands were employed, to become sole breadwinners for their families. Like the Great Depression and WWII eras, more and more homemakers are being forced into the workforce. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, more than 2.1 million wives whose husbands are unemployed are supporting their families. This finding is particularly troubling because research indicates that women's earnings fall 10% each year they are out of the workforce, putting women who reenter the workforce in a very unfortunate position. In households headed by women, unemployment rates exceed 30%. To make matters worse, many women feel the added burden of finding affordable childcare if they are to reenter the workforce. The cost of care can be very high, and requires a significant share of a family's monthly earnings—most families in Connecticut spend 30% to 40% of their income on childcare. In addition, women who manage to secure full-time employment and qualify for employer subsidized health care for their families find it difficult to afford the employer contribution because their pay is low.

Women make up 51% of the population and nearly 50% of the workforce, their economic security as we come out of this recession is critical to the growth and development of the state and this country.

Recommendations

My list of working recommendations represent an overview of the comprehensive areas that need to be assessed and are intended to raise awareness of women's economic vulnerability during these recessionary times. These recommendations are not listed in order of importance.

1) Pay Equity: Women earn 77 cents for every dollar earned by men. As noted earlier, the situation is more stark for women of color. Pay equity would lighten the load placed on women, particularly single mothers and women who reenter the labor force. Mothers are 44% less likely to be hired than non-mothers for the same job given the same resume and experience. Additionally, mothers are offered an average of \$11,000 less than non-mothers with equal qualifications. The wage gap also means that the benefits attached to employment are lower for women in terms of future raises and employer matched retirement contributions. Raising awareness of pay inequality is the fastest and most effective way to continue the gradual process of closing the gender pay gap. Furthermore, the wage gap not only affects women, but their entire families who also experience the day-to-day effects of a smaller paycheck.

2) Job Training and Reentry Programs: As the job climate changes and women reenter the workforce, it is essential to create programs to help women re-tool for the new economy. This is a key to narrowing the wage gap. Community colleges and technical schools should play a role in this process, particularly for women with limited educational backgrounds. In addition, for educated women who reenter the workforce, we must create policy incentives for employers to hire these employees at a salary commensurate with their education and the skills they develop as *household managers*.

3) Affordable Healthcare: Most employers require employees to work full-time in order to be eligible for employer subsidized healthcare plans. In the absence of meaningful healthcare reform at the national level, we must look for ways to make healthcare more affordable for all working families, whether the employee is full- or part-time. This is especially important if we want to focus on preventive care—a more cost effective option. As an example of what's happening due to today's economic problems, a recent Gallup survey of 1,031 women ages 18-44 revealed that 1 in 7 women have postponed their annual ob-gyn checkup because of financial problems. Women should not be in a situation where they must choose between preventive reproductive health options or paying their bills. To put it in the context of our state, Connecticut women have higher out-of-pocket medical expenses than men, and are more vulnerable to medical debt. Fifty-six percent of medical bankruptcy filers are women.

4) Flex- Employment Options: One development connected to the flow of women into the workforce was the rise of flextime, telecommuting, and job sharing. Because women still remain the primary care givers in most US households, these creative employment incentives made it easier for women to balance home and work responsibilities. It is important that these programs continue to be available to women even in these tough economic times. It would be easy for

employers to phase out such programs given the demand for jobs in this economy. It is in our interest to create incentives for employers to maintain these options.

5) Subsidized Childcare: Even before the recession, affordable childcare has been out of reach for many families. For many working women, their employment means that children are unsupervised or in less than ideal child care situations. To support women and their families, we must engage in creative ideas to subsidize childcare and increase the number of childcare providers so that families are no longer paying such a high price for women's participation in the labor force. In addition, we must explore options to increase the number of licensed child care providers in the state. Current capacity in Connecticut licensed child care centers can accommodate only around 40% of all children under age five.

6) Family Leave / Paid Sick Days: The State of Connecticut was the first state to enact a Family Medical Leave law, even before those benefits were expanded to all Americans in 1993 through the federal Family Medical Leave Act. The major omission from the federal law is that while employees may take a leave of absence for a number of medical reasons without fear of losing their job, employers are not mandated to pay employees during their leave. Particularly for poor and middle class families, taking three months off work without pay is unthinkable because their families live from paycheck to paycheck. While it is difficult to imagine finding ways to subsidize family leave during these challenging economic times, we must consider the hardship experienced particularly by new parents today and develop ideas aimed at supporting families during life changing transitions. One small step for consideration should be a paid sick day policy for all Connecticut businesses.

7) Public Transportation: Many poor women lack reliable transportation that would allow them to look for jobs outside of a very narrow radius from their homes. Reliable public transit options aimed at connecting poor communities with areas where there are jobs would extend opportunities for all.

8) We must continue to encourage women to run for political office, serve on important commissions, and climb the ladder in our nation's corporations. Women remain underrepresented (compared to their population) in all these important areas. The reason this is essential has to do with the unique perspective women bring to the table. In politics at the national level, a large body of scholarship exists to show that without women in office, many of the federal policies favorable and relevant to women and families would not have been enacted. Comparing ourselves to other industrialized democracies in terms of women's representation in politics and on corporate boards might give us some ideas about how we might change our system. Connecticut has historically had a strong representation of women, however more intentional efforts must be made to get more women in to more leadership roles, boards and commissions and corporate boards. It is particularly important that an effort be made to appoint more women of color to Connecticut boards and commissions where they make up less than 4% of these appointed bodies.

In conclusion, I hope that my remarks today highlighted the important role women play in moving us through these critical times. The policies supported by the PCSW reflect some of the most important priorities for our State as we explore alternative economic recovery strategies with any eye toward ensuring that women and their families regain fiscal stability. Although much of the media spotlight has zeroed in on our male counterparts during this recession, women are essential to turning our economy around.

Thank you.

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To Whom It May Concern:

The U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau has a long history of working with the women's commissions across the country to improve women's working conditions and to advance their employment opportunities. The Women's Bureau in Region I based in Boston has worked cooperatively and successfully with the Women's Commissions on the Status of Women in the six New England states, including the Connecticut Permanent Commission on the Status of Women for many years.

The Connecticut Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) has been a valuable resource for the Women's Bureau and for the other state and local commissions in New England. PCSW has served as a leader and inspiration for other state and city women's commissions across New England. The leadership of PCSW regularly attends the tri-annual meetings of the New England Coalition of Commissions on the Status of Women. Several years ago, past leaders of the PCSW traveled to Vermont when the status of the Vermont Commission on Women was in question. Together, the New England commissions provide support to one another in achieving their common mission of serving women.

As Regional Administrator of the Bureau for the past fourteen years, I have personally worked with the Commission under the capable leadership of the current Executive Director, Teresa Younger, and the past Executive Director, Leslie Brett. The Commission has been the recipient of numerous Women's Bureau contract awards for education, outreach, and demonstration projects to advance the opportunities of Connecticut women in numerous areas including equal pay, non-traditional occupations, and financial literacy. The Commission has also served as an excellent resource on Connecticut programs of value to women and girls including local programming across the state on science, technology, engineering, and math career educational opportunities for girls and women, multi-cultural events, and student enrichment programs.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude and appreciation for the important work done by the PCSW. Please contact me if I can be of any further assistance in answering any questions about the Women's Bureau work with the Commission.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Cooke
Regional Administrator

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